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ABSTRACT

Based on the premise that personality psychology is aimed ultimately at providing a scientific basis for understanding individuals, it is argued on several grounds that the assessment and study of individual differences is essentially useless to the discipline. The basis for an alternative approach, termed "idiothetic," is described, in which personality description is achieved in a purely idiographic fashion, and in which nomothetic prinicples are sought with respect to questions of process, i.e., change, development, etc. Some major implications of this conception of personality are briefly considered. (Author)

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Toward An Idiothetic Conception of Personality

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In his book, Conceptions of Personality, Levy (1970) succinctly describes the objective of personality psychology as follows:

> Colloquially, it might be said that in personality we are interested in learning the best way to describe what kind of a person a man is, how he got that way, what keeps him that way, what might make him change, and how we might use all this to explain why he behaves as he does and predict how he will behave in the future (p. 29).

The pronouns which Levy (1970) has used in this passage undoubtedly stand out today by virtue of their masculinity. However, for purposes of the present discussion, the most significant feature of these pronouns is their singularity. Levy's description of the field is not unique in this regard. Most personality texts begin with some statement to the effect that the psychology of personality is concerned ultimately with providing a scientific basis for understanding the individual (see, e.g., Bavelas, 1979, p. 1; Lamberth, Rappaport, & Rappaport, 1978, p. 6; Liebert & Spiegler, 1978, pp. 7-8; Mischel, 1976, p. 2; Pervin 1975, p. 3).

Throughout the history of our discipline (see, e.g., Sharp, 1899), it has been widely assumed that the most appropriate way to describe what kind of a person one is is with reference to the "enduring and consequential" ways in which she/he differs from others (cf. Block, Note 1). This individual differences conception of personality is most apparent, of course, in straightforward applications of what has come to be known as the "classical" nomothetic paradigm, (cf. Beck, 1953; Eysenck, 1954; Falk, 1956; Kleinmuntz, 1967; Nunnally, 1967) but it is only slightly - if at all - less discernible in applications of so-called "alternative" strategies.

A careful reading of those authors who have explored the possibilities provided by ipsative assessment procedures reveals their ultimate concern

with the study of individual differences (cf. Block, 1957; Cattell, 1944; Edwards, 1959; Guilford, 1954; Heilbrun, 1963). Similarly, in examining the empirical literature said to be compatible with the idiographic perspective espoused by Gordon Allport (1937, 1962, 1967), one finds that personality descriptions are rooted ultimately in comparisons between individuals. Recent work by Daryl Bem and his colleagues (Bem, 1977; Bem & Allen, 1974; Bem & Funder, 1978) provides but one example of this (see also Block, 1961; Crockett, 1965; Landfield, 1976; Stephenson, 1953). Finally, there is nothing in personality psychology's current Zeitgeist, interactionism (cf. Argyle & Little, 1972; Bowers, 1973; Ekehammar, 1974; Endler, 1975; Endler & Magnusson, 1976; Magnusson & Ekehammar, 1975; Mischel, 1973; 1977) to suggest that personality variables - whatever role they may play in determining behavior - should be thought of in any way other than that implied by the time-honored individual differences view.

If the objective of personality psychology is indeed to provide a scientific basis for understanding individuals, and if virtually all of our empirical literature is not to be regarded as inadequate for this purpose, then it must be assumed that, eventually, an adequate understanding of individuals will be entirely contained within an adequate understanding of individual differences. In the few remaining minutes which have been allotted to me today, I would like to discuss several good reasons for believing that this assumption is untenable, and to suggest the basis for an alternative approach better suited to the central objective of the psychology of personality.

CONSTRAINTS ON THE UNDERSTANDING OF INDIVIDUALS IMPOSED BY THE STUDY OF INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

The assessment and study of individual differences constrains our understanding of individuals in three major ways.

First in most applications of the individual differences conception of personality, it is at least implicitly assumed that the characteristics chosen by the investigator for study are, in principle, applicable to all persons. In their well-known paper, Bem and Allen (1974) argued that this assumption of universal applicability is problematic, and suggested that all attempts to measure individual differences should incorporate some procedure for isolating ahead of time those persons to whom the characteristics being measured can be meaningfully applied. If the assumption of universal applicability constituted the only problem with the traditional individual differences conception of personality, then perhaps if we all followed the advice of Bem and Allen (1974), everything would be fine.

Unfortunately, this is not the case. A second major problem is that even if an investigator has determined that a specified set of characteristics is applicable within a given group of persons, there is obviously no guarantee that those characteristics are the only ones applicable to any one individual in the group. For a time, perhaps, there was reason to believe that the diligent use of factor analysis in personality research would solve this problem, by "revealing" the dimensions necessary and sufficient for a comprehensive description of the human personality (Cattell, 1957; 1965; Eysenck, 1976; Guilford, 1959). We are still waiting (cf. Cattell, 1972; Eysenck, 1969; Guilford, 1975; see also Fiske, 1978). In the meantime, personality investigators have been left with two general options, both of which have been exercised in empirical research, and neither of which is satisfactory for purposes of understanding individuals.

One of these options is to intensively study single individual differences variables, and is reflected in the development of entire research programs centered around constructs such as authoritarianism (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Stanford, 1950), achievement motivation (Atkinson & Feather, 1966; McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953), machiavellianism (Christie & Geis, 1970), and locus of control (Phares, 1973; 1976; Rotter, 1966). It is this option, incidentally, which is most compatible with the Bem/Allen version of idiography, which encourages investigators to "find those people" to whom previously decided-upon personality characteristics can be meaningfully applied.

Since there is no compelling evidence that the empirical findings of parallel research programs can be systematically combined into an integrated characterization of anyone, and since no one seriously contends that individuals can be comprehensively described by any one personality construct, this strategy amounts to at least a provisional tolerance for oversimplified personality descriptions.

The second of the two options referred to above is to simultaneously measure individual differences on a large number of personality variables, in the hope of achieving at least some breadth in personality descriptions (cf. Block, 1971; Jackson, 1970). This is a sensible strategy provided one accepts the assumption of universal applicability. It is easy to see that this strategy encounters serious problems -- both logistic and conceptual -- the moment one questions this assumption.

Yet a third constraint imposed on our understanding of individuals by the study of individuals differences, and one which is completely independent of the first two, is that the status of an individual on a given personality characteristic is regarded as meaningful only in comparison with the status

of others on the same characteristic. The major problem with this view emerges in the context of a very basic issue in personality psychology: consistency vs. change (cf. Mischel, 1968, 1969).

The logic of the individual differences view is such that the consistency of an individual over time with respect to a given characteristic must be empirically defined as the variance of his/her standardized scores on some measure of what characteristic. The problem with this is that variance can be non-zero -- indicating some degree of inconsistency -- even if that individual's behavior is perfectly consistent over time. The reason, of course, is that one's measured status on a personality characteristic at a given point in time depends not only on what she/he does but also on what is done by others with whom she/he is being compared.

Regardless of their magnitudes, the reliability and validity coefficients in which empirical personality psychology has invested so much do not provide an adequate basis for inferring the degree of stability in the behavior of any one person. They measure instead the stability of behavioral differences between individuals, which is an altogether different matter. If personality psychology is genuinely concerned with providing a scientific basis for understanding individuals, and if knowledge regarding stability (and change) is to be regarded as germane to the effort -- as it surely must be -- (cf. Riegel, 1976, 1978), then continued reliance on the individual differences conception will only impede progress. For, as regards stability and change in an individual, the empirical findings yielded by this conception are essentially worthless.

A POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVE TO THE INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES CONCEPTION OF PERSONALITY

A viable alternative to the individual differences conception of personality can be built on the following premise:

The substance of an individual's personality, i.e., its pertinent structural features, as well as the status of that individual with respect thereto at any given time, consists in the characterization of that individual's behavior over some prior interval of time, in terms of attributes which contrast that behavior with alternative possibilities for behavior perceived by the characterizer to have existed for that individual.

Stated more concisely but, unfortunately, less precisely, this premise asserts that the "kind of person" one is perceived to be, by oneself and/or by another, depends upon what one has done in comparison with what one has not done but might have done.

A formal model of assessment consistent with this premise can be defined as follows:

$$S_{pc} = \sum_{i=1}^{m} (B_{pi})(R_{ic}) \qquad (1)$$

where

S_{pc} refers to the status of person p on personality characteristic c,

B_{pi} refers to the "score" of person p on behavioral variable i, and

R_{ic} refers to the relevance of behavioral variable i to personality characteristic c.

Actually, any attempt to specify the status of an individual on a personality characteristic can be described in terms of this model. What distinguishes the present approach from the individual differences perspective is that the meaning of a single S_{pc} value is not derived from by comparing that value with the S_{pc} values assigned to other persons (or, for that matter, with the S_{pc} value assigned to the same person on other characteristics, as in ipsative assessment). Rather, a single S_{pc} value

has meaning simply because it is S_{pc} and not S'_{pc}, where the latter value represents, collectively the alternative possible scores on characteristic c which might have been assigned to person p had she/he behaved differently.

Over any given period of time in one's life, an individual confronts a variety of possible alternatives for action. As Equation (1) suggests the characterization of that individual's behavior over that time interval, which is essentially what personality assessment is all about, emerges from (a) a contrast between those alternatives in terms of their perceived salient attributes, together with (b) knowledge (or perhaps merely beliefs) regarding which alternatives have been (more or less) selected by the individual in question and which have been (more or less) rejected.

An empirical description of the way in which alternative possibilities for behavior are conceptualized with respect to some attributes(s) provides the R_{ic} component of Equation (1). Such an empirical description might be achieved, for example, through the use of multidimensional scaling procedures (cf. Carroll & Chang, 1970). An empirical description of one's behavior vis-a-vis the domain of alternative possibilities (i.e., one's "scores" on the B_is of Equation (1)) could be achieved by any of the usual methods for recording an individual's behavior. Combining these two sets of data in some explicit manner (which is tantamount to a specification of the function in Equation (1)), yields an S_{pc} value for that individual which stands as an empirical characterization of that person's behavior, in terms of some attribute(s), over the time interval in question. The meaning of this value is entirely contained within a knowledge of the alternative possible S_{pc} values (i.e., S'_{pc}s) which might have been obtained by that individual had she/he behaved differently. There is neither any need for nor any advantage to interpreting a single S_{pc} value with reference to the S_{pc} values assigned to other persons.

It is obviously not possible to pursue here all of the ramifications of what has just been said. In what time remains, however, I would like to touch on three important points.

First, it is not being argued here that behavioral differences between people are irrelevant to the psychology of personality. They clearly are relevant, because they are likely to be the major determinant of the alternative possibilities for behavior perceived by an individual at any given point in time. However, the mere fact that the behavior of two persons can be differentiated with reference to some attribute is not, by itself, a good basis for inferring that the attribute is relevant to a characterization of either person. In a very real sense, it is precisely this non-sequitor in which empirical personality psychology has been mired for the past 80 or so years.

A second point which bears mentioning here is that, from the present perspective, the psychology of personality has no need for situational constructs per se. Certainly, all behavior can be said to occur within some psychological situation. However, parsimony in theorizing requires us to consider whether saying this adds anything to the understanding of personality. The answer, at least from the present perspective is that it does not. The reason is that personality-relevant inferences and assertions derive from conceptions of alternative possibilities for behavior (cf. Rychlak, 1976; Tyler, 1959, 1978). To specify and characterize those alternatives at any given point in time is to define the psychological situation for that individual. There is simply no need to characterize situations on any other basis.

The final point which I should like to make here is perhaps the most important. The assessment model which I have described is purely, as opposed to quasi- or pseudo-idiographic. It is this feature which "liberates"

it from all of the constraints discussed earlier. However, precisely because it is purely idiographic, one might be inclined to reject this model on grounds that it would preclude the possibility of a nomothetic science of personality. The major objection to "pure" idiography has always been thus. As Nunnally (1967, p. 472) put it:

> Idiography is an anti-science point of view: it discourages the search for general laws and instead encourages the description of particular phenomena (i.e., people) . . . To accept an idiographic point of view in advance is to postulate that only chaos prevails in the description of human personalities.

Unfortunately, this argument confounds a very useful distinction, drawn long ago by Titchener (1898) between structure and process. The presumption that general principles of personality can be formulated does not require the assumption that all -- or even any two -- persons are comparable in terms of the substantive features of their personalities. In other words, it is entirely possible to conceive of a science of personality in which questions of structure or substance are addressed idiographically, and in which the search for nomothetic principles is focused on questions of process, i.e., change, development, etc. The use of the term "idiothetic" to describe the framework proposed here is intended to suggest just such a conception.

By pursuing systematically the implications of this conception in research, empirical personality psychology will come face to face with the concepts of "identity" and "individuality." This would be no mean achievement. For while the individual differences conception of personality has failed us miserably with respect to these concepts they remain, as some have noted (e.g., Rychlak, 1976; Tyler, 1978) the very essence of the concept of personality itself.

Reference Note

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